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Talking Houses

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Talking Houses

An interview with Tod Williams and Billie Tsien



Sloane House

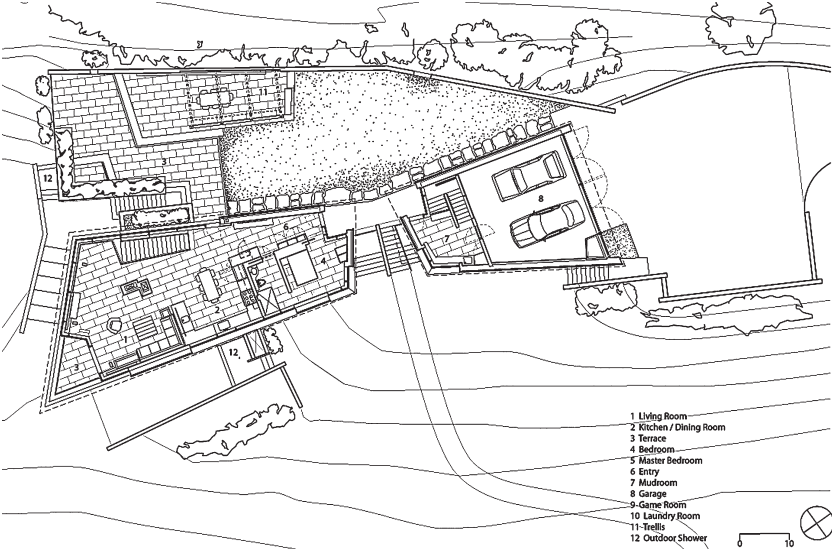
What does “house” mean to you as a protean architectural problem?

Tod: I should say that a house for us is a kind of central architectural problem and I’d always like to be working on a house if I could. As young architects you probably dream of doing houses. I think that it’s an amazing problem to take on because it’s such a personal problem. Simply finding one’s place in this world is what we are all trying to do. Making such a place seems a tremendously interesting problem—it is the primary dwelling. Unfortunately most of the houses we do design are for people who are actually not like us and who have more money. So many times we are thinking about their problems and at the same time thinking about problems that are central and meaningful to ourselves. So there are difficulties with houses as a project. We try to work on houses for people we actually like and respect. We try not to take on houses that seem full of fluff or that are for people that we again don’t like.

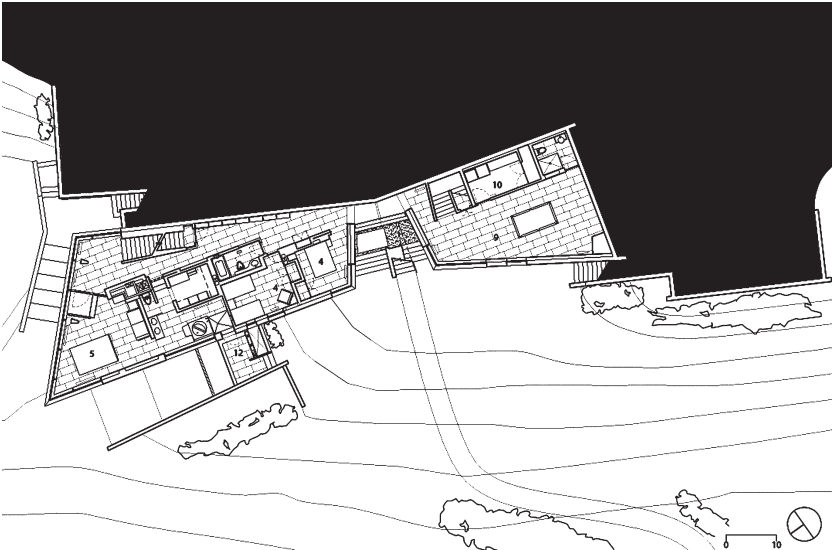
It’s very personal. It’s almost too personal for Billie. You would think in the sort of simplistic diagram of the way things are, that a woman would be more interested in the domestic situation than a man, but fortunately life isn’t so simplistic. I’m more interested in it than she is.

What is the center of house for you or does this change with the individual project?

Tod: I think that it changes. I would say that I am more of a nomad, personally. So for me—the sort of wanderer, the sort of meanderer—a place that I can muse and walk is almost the center of my house—always moving and not settled. The center of a house for Billie, I’ll bet, would be the bath tub with a book, a chair with a book, or the bed with a book. For me it’s really watching the light move through the day, finding the pool of warmth or a place that is cool. It’s a constantly changing and evolving situation. When we work for clients we are mostly trying to find out



Sloane House, Upper Plan



Sloane House, Lower Plan

what the center would be for them. In one recent house, the Rifkind House, Arlene, although not a cook, really believed that the center was around the kitchen. And we'd like to think that it's around the kitchen for us too. Billie is a great cook and I can even cook OK, but we are so much on the move that it's not really there for us.

In the case of the Sloane House, Rob actually is interested in the kitchen being a center—an important part, but he's also very active physically, he loves to bike and kayak. He's always on the move, so he has two centers: the world outside and also the kitchen—which is in the most center part of the living room volume that we've got there.

So we really try to figure out what's right for them as well as things that we value.

So with you wanting to meander and move through the house do you find it difficult to design for people who want a nest or cells to live in?

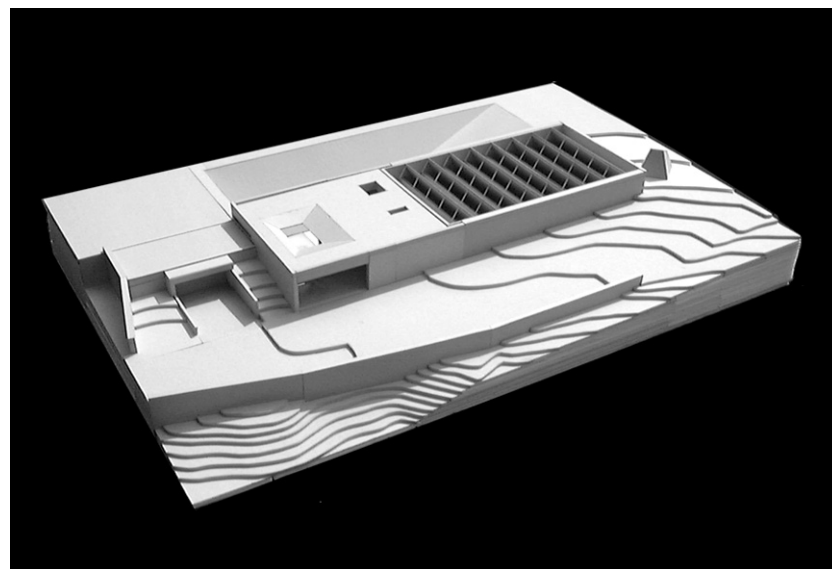
Tod: It isn't so difficult for me, but I am constantly trying to read my own values into their interests. I'm afraid we do that don't we? Even though some one tells you something, I'm constantly asking them to open it up and challenging them to open it up my way. Actually I like it when Billie does it her way. I think that is very interesting making a house because it becomes a dialogue between their needs and our expertise. We have a lot

of experience in this area, so it really works well when we are in a constant dialogue.

Coming out of that, how do you design for a personality? Is a house a sculptural representation or extension of the person/personality or is it more of a container for this personality?

Billie: Well, I don't think it's ever considered a type of sculpture, I think that what we do is spend a lot of time listening and thinking about this person's life and then trying to make containers that will hold it in a way that can give them a sort of peace and shelter.

Tod: I would say that in talking about a person's house we try to say that we're trying to make this your house, but at the same time we want to believe in an architecture that lasts beyond the life of a single person. So we are also trying to find something that has general qualities and values that we want to leave on the land, and qualities that we want to bring to the project. So we try to make sure that it's not just the definition of a person's personality. If that is the case, then we probably would turn down the project. I mean it would certainly, at least, have to be a dialogue. We have a pretty good example of this. We are working on an addition to a house that Michael Rotondi did, but we are making an art barn/gallery. The client who came to us wanted the project



Model of Art Barn/ Gallery

to reflect his idea of what art is and so we found something that related both to the Rotondi work and to his idea of what art is about and also what we believe it is about. The result is a kind of three-way conversation that we believe is worth having on the land. In the case of Rob Sloane, he kept saying that he wanted the house to be something substantial, because the last one burnt down, and at the same time he wanted to stand out at the tip of the house and feel the wind almost shake the house. So he had two things going for him and we tried to listen to that. But I don't think that it is ever a specific personality. Say, the house is for a poet so it looks like a piece of poetry or something like that. We'd like all of our work to

have an element of poetry to it, but it's not poetry. Its architecture. We always start with a house from the inside out, never from the outside in, after all ninety percent of a person's time is spent inside a house or inside architecture. So its not sculpture.

Do you feel that the house changes with the occupant or is the house a kind of immortal piece.

Billie: I think the house changes over time as a person changes over time. But I think we build things very, very carefully. That has a lot to do with Tod, (probably mostly to do with Tod), but certainly in doing that we think we are giving the house good bones like a person has good bones.

All things wear, but there is a sort of structure there that stands up to time.

Tod: I think when you're first starting out as an architect you can make two mistakes. One is to impose your ideas too much on the work and the other is to let the client's ideas impose themselves too much on the work. Those are two different problems. If the client's ideas impose themselves too much on the work in a certain way the work will change just from client to client, it's sort of "what I want," "I'll bring in my decorator," "I'll change it this way by whim."

I worked for Richard Meier for years, and his version is so strong that the owner is sort of prisoner to the house or can be. So we want it to work both ways. If it is working best it will work both ways and the house will live beyond the life of the owner, but the house will actually change as they learn how to use it.

How do you see the evolution of house moving? Many modern houses are blurring the lines between public and private domain do you see house as a place of separation or more as something that is fluid with no divisions.

Billie: I think that the houses that we make, form separations, whether it's the Rifkind House as a series of pavilions which are connected by glass corridors. Or whether it's the Sloane House which separates the garage and work element away from the main house but still connects them underground and to an extent above ground. I think we always want to make these places a kind of refuge so the house feels as one but you are able to find your own place and quiet.

Tod: Actually that's funny I would have answered that in the reverse way, but maybe the outcome is the same. I mean I think that these things flow, rather than forming a strict definition of public and private. It depends on

where that statement came from. Is the statement of public/private, defined by something. Lets go back, what do you envision when you think of a public/private home? Is it Villa Rotunda? Or what do you in fact mean by it? I know when I was working for Richard Meier we divided public versus private in the Smith House and the Douglas House. We almost put a wall between them. I was project architect on the Douglas House and I would say that division is stronger than I would like it to be today; that kind of wall of small cells on one side and then the living portion on the other. But both Richard and Palladio see the whole thing as an object, so in a way it's all public. It's a hard question for me to answer unless you tell me a little more about where you are coming from.

The question actually is meant to deal more with the idea of houses becoming more of a live/work space, and how you define the public being more of the work space and the private space the living space.

Tod: I understand. I would say that in our own lives we very much blur these issues. Basically our home is like studio and our studio is like home. We try to separate them but they are pretty blurred. As far as our clients go they want the separation. Though they might say, "Look I want an office in my home," they want separation—they might talk blur, but they want separation. We live a blur.

Billie: I think about the specific houses that we've done...

Tod: Yeah like Gretchen and Alan's. She works at home...

Billie: They're still separated, I don't think that we are making a big kind of blur-continuous spaces. I think that's the way Tod and I live, but when people come to us for houses, number one they... well that's not true, because Phoenix was their primary house... but

most people want secondary houses so they are not so interested in making big working spaces there. Phoenix was their primary house, but we're always pulling things away. Tod, I agree with you that we have very little separation in our own lives, but I don't think the houses that we make have very little separation, I think they are about making these separate places that are connected.

Tod: Yeah so we are on the same page, I think.

In your own home do you have niches that you go to sit in and reflect or is it open and flowing space?

Tod: Our home is nine hundred square feet. We have a door to the bathroom, but for twenty years we had no actual closure to that bathroom. We have no door to our bedroom or to our son's bedroom. There was no other door except for the closet doors, but there are areas of separation. The plan is this sort of doughnut, and we live in a loft up above, we climb a ladder. There are niches where one can tuck away, get away for awhile. It's definitely not a conventional sort of plan.

When you are designing houses what does it take to make a threshold for you, a change in experience of place? And how do you create this change?

Billie: I'm thinking again of the house in Phoenix where the change occurs with a slight level change and also with a sort of bridge or connection, which is very much defined as a separate or connecting piece. You see it as a connecting piece because physically the dimensions change and experientially it is made of glass. You are much more aware of being outdoors. You are moving from one space, which is very enclosed, across a bridge, which is very much about looking at the outdoors, and into another enclosed space.

Tod: I would say that increasingly

in houses, there are more and more thresholds, but they are different types. Billie mentioned one type. Another type could be a change in height, another one could be a change in material. I think these thresholds are actually the way by which a building can break down its overall form into a series of other places where one can reside, even if it is more or less an open container. So thresholds can be done by material changes or by volumetric changes or by, as Billie said, opening it up. It could be done through light, and there are many of these, and in fact the orchestration of these gives real richness to a house. If I could convince people, I would make ever smaller houses, not ever larger houses, because I think that you can accomplish many of these in a small space and they then make a small space very rich to live in.

You mentioned the glass in the desert house. We were wondering if this derived from your desire to be outdoors, to pull the landscape in and be connected to the landscape, because it does not seem to be about framing at all, but about some sort of connection.

Tod: Absolutely

Billie: It's always about connections

Tod: There are many times in our work where there are frames, where one looks to another space. Kind of like the many frames to the moon gates in a Chinese garden, something that we've always been interested in—framing views, layers and transparency, but in general its about connecting not separation. A wall for me is about connecting not separating, it's how you make these things that gives them that quality of either connection or separation.

So are there any memories of your childhood and the houses that you grew up in that influence your design, as your desire to be outside has influenced your

use of the window?

Tod: Well I've said that in another time I grew up in a house with two stairways, it was a fairly large house, not huge but large. I loved the fact that my brother, sister and I could chase each other around the house in an endless circle. Chase one another in the opposite direction and then escape to the outside. Any time I can I have that organization in my life I'll have it.

Billie: As Tod says I'm a book worm. I was always trying to hide from my parents so I would not have to go outside and do lawn chores. I would go into their bedroom and then into their bathroom, go into their shower and close the door and sit there with my book trying to stay under the radar. I think that this desire to make a place that is a place away from other things is very important to me.

Tod: I agree. Within this sort of endless chase that I am talking about there are many secret spaces. I would always want that. I love that sort of alcove that Billie is talking about. She would like the alcove to have a door on it so I couldn't come in; I would like the alcove to be in such a way that I can come and visit her.

We've been talking about occupied spaces, but what about these unoccupiable spaces, these things that you cannot place yourself within. You can desire to be there, but you can never be there.

Tod: I think that is part of this world within a world. I think that is what a house can be. You can create a universe within a house. These are places of the imagination. You have to go there physically to imagine yourself there. It could be a place that takes a pool of light or a sort of crevice that you put your mind in.

Is that what the water elements in many of your houses represents for you?

Tod: I see the water being a connection

to the land and to the sky. I find them a place of serenity. Your mind is more often there than your body.

Billie: I agree

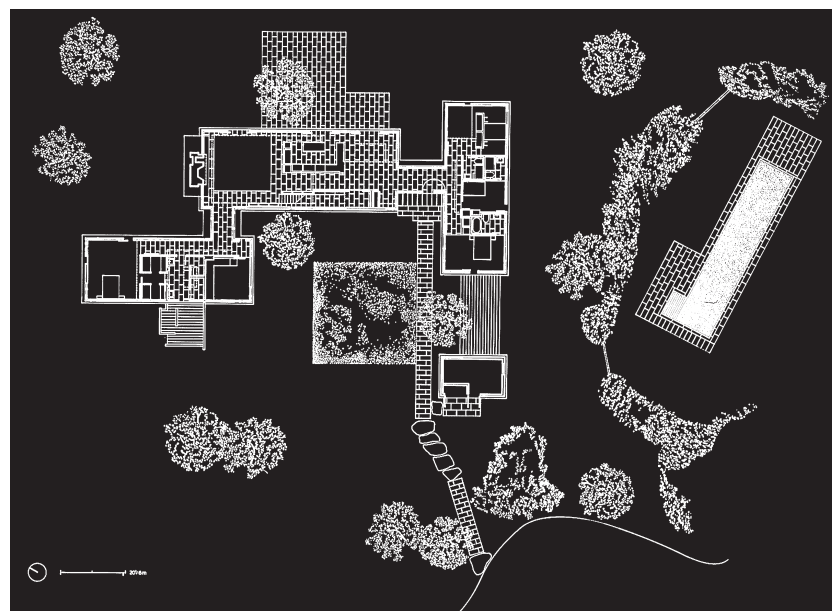
We'd like to close the interview with a question about where you see the house going in the near future? How do you see the design of houses changing?

Tod: I would say that maybe as we—people—have sort of multiple *pieds-à-terre*, I mean we don't really, but we are about to make our vacation home about five hundred feet from our regular home. And its going to be a little smaller than our nine hundred square foot home. I see that there are people who will want larger and larger houses and I feel terribly unhappy about that. Increasingly there are ways that you can imagine yourself in a world unto itself away somewhere else. I'm pretty pleased when I go to hotels that are very well designed, for example, and have interesting small rooms with layers of space and sensitivities. I could see that we will have more and more of these, and the hotel will become more of a home away from home.

Billie: That's pretty utopian Tod! I totally agree with you. That is what I would like to see as the future of houses. Unfortunately what I see is that people in the United States seem to believe that they need things which are larger and larger. They need to be more and more protected. I see larger and larger homes with expanded spaces that do not make any sense other than that they are big, behind walls, they are gated communities. This is where the people who can afford to will live, other than those few people who believe that architecture is an important contribution to their lives.



Rifkind House, Interior



Rifkind House Plan